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ABSTRACT

Since the Middle Ages, sport has survived because of its masochistic and sadistic components. The Greeks, who organized athletic contests into the Olympic Games in 776 B.C., emphasized the relationship between the mind and the body and fair competition, rather than putting emphasis on winning or losing. The Romans preferred the spectacle of unequal combat among gladiators, prisoners, and animals. After the fall of Rome, asceticism and scholarship thrived, and physical conditioning was important only to noblemen who were knights. Their valor and tactical skill during jousts delighted the crowds, who revelled in the violence. During the Middle Ages, the result of most sport was the infliction of injury, or even death. Although the Renaissance offered some hope of a return to the Greek ideals, dual and team contests were increasingly popular. In modern times, sports organizations have attacked the evils of unfair competition and violence in sport, and they must continue to resist the prevalent attitude that winning is everything. Violence in sport is reflected in books, movies, and in society itself. The future of sport depends on the revival of the Greek ideal of athletics. (FG)

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MEDIEVAL SPORT: QUEST FOR SURVIVAL

Dr. Douglas C. Wiseman

When one studies the evolution of sport through history, it is all too apparent that the theme pervading the pomp and glory of its very existence has been its ability to capitalize on violence. This was so in the era of the Roman Olympiad; this was so in the ascetic and feudalistic period of medievalism; this is so today.

The appeal of sport to millions of spectators, viewing from selected vantage points in a stadium or from soft chairs in the family room, is and has been the abusive exercise of force, and the intimidation and maiming of opponents. I am not speaking of the few who enjoy the beauty and grace of movement found in the performance of the gymnast, swimmer, sprinter, or marathon athlete, I am referring to the throngs who watch and enjoy the collision checks and high sticks in ice hockey, the pitcher who, but by a whisker, misses decapitating a .350 hitter, the herd of linebackers who crush the opposing quarterback for the fifth time in the first quarter, the boxer who pulverizes his opponent to a state of comatose.

Can one possibly believe that the multimillion dollar purses in boxing come from fans who pay to see the timing and coordination of a left jab and right cross combination, . . . or a grown man in sneakers, short pants, and a high waist belt? I think not. The reason that sport has survived is because of its masochistic and sadistic components. Where high risk exists, public support through history has been overwhelmingly positive.

There are games, there are war games, and there are games that are warlike. To seek victory, the soldier and the athlete must

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act aggressively toward others. Though the intent to cripple and destroy goes counter to fair play, and the wreath or the gold medal of the Olympics, the fact that organizations governing amateur and professional sports have failed to halt or, in many cases, censor violence in sport, men and women alike are, in increasing numbers, falling victims to its charm. To support my thesis, I would like to reconstruct, briefly, the relationship of violence and sport through selected periods of history.

The Greeks were the first people in the world to organize for play.[1] Throughout Greece there were games and contests of many sorts -- races on foot, in boats, and on horses; there were interpretive dance, gymnastics, and wrestling activities. According to Pindar, et. al., these "glorious-limbed youth" strove for honor (on its own terms). If we had no other knowledge of what these early Greeks were like -- if nothing were left of Greek art and literature -- the fact that they were in love with play, and played magnificantly, would be proof enough of how they lived and how they looked at life. Give witness the influence of Aristotle and Plato and their contributions to the development of such intellectual and physical culture centers as The Academy, The Kynosarges, and The Lyceum. It is believed that there was a significantly high (positive) relationship between the mind and the body.

Following the national athletic festivals were the games -- the Olympic Games -- where, at Olympia, there were as many as 40,000 spectators at a single event. These Olympic Games, as they came to be called, were first held in 776 B.C. and continued every four years, it is believed, until 394 A.D. when they were abolished by the Romans.

The games of ancient Greece will always be viewed with pride by those of us who choose to identify sport with the virtues of art and fair play. Equality of the conditions for competition was important to the Greeks and they went to considerable trouble to avoid certain inequalities. Men were separated from boys on the basis of size and physical maturity rather than chronological age alone. During the events of an athletic festival, officials watched diligently for possible unfairness and, if found, wielded punishment. (A survey of art forms will note that, on numerous vases, pictures portray officials whipping athletes who had committed infractions of the rules.) It would appear that, unlike the principles associated with Vince Lombardi, there was lack of emphasis on winning or losing (. . . and more will be said about that).

It is doubtful that Roman athletic sports were modeled according to principles laid down by the Greeks. In the arena, swordsmen fought men armed with nets and three-pronged spears (called tridents), men fought animals, and the audience lusted for ever more improbable encounters which depraved emperors hastened to provide. The spectators wanted something more exciting, bloody, ghastly, and sensational. Teams of men were pitted against each other in battles to the death. Such was the administrator/manager's response to the demonstrated interests of the spectators.

The Roman fondness for inequality in gladiatorial combat provides us with an unexpected clue to the status of such sports as bull fighting, professional wrestling and, yes, little league baseball. With the Greeks, athletic competition was governed by the principles of fair play. Further, the "holistic" concept of mind and body was not questioned. Unfortunately, these attitudes were

to be replaced by a lust for violence in the era of Roman athletics, and the vanity of honor in the Middle Ages. Chivalry was not dead -- unlike the victims of "feudalism" and the principles of fair play.

The fall of the Roman Empire, and the associated emergence of the Dark Ages, took place in and around 476 A.D. Out of pagan and immoral Rome, Christianity and asceticism grew and thrived. The principles of asceticism did not provide for the pursuit of "worldly pleasures". The prevailing philosophy consisted of fostering self-denial and, in some instances, self-torture which obviously had a negative effect on personal health and longevity. The emphasis in the universities and monasteries of this period was on scholarship. Little if anything was done to promote organized athletics or physical education. The feudalistic period, to which a portion of this era has often been referred, was staged between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries.

Available to the sons of noblemen during the feudalistic period was training for knighthood. If, after exhaustive mental and physical conditioning, the candidate proved his fitness, he became a knight. Jousts and tournaments were two special, yet common, events in which all knights engaged. These were the trials and tests of honor. Many sports of the medieval period differed from those of the Greeks in that sports of the middle ages were full of heroic fancy and decoration. The overt expression of courage during jousting tournaments, for example, was considered worthy of highest praise. The spectators would delight in the glory of the victor and in the demise of his opponent. The greater the strength and tactical skill of the Knight in Shining Armor, the greater the pleasure of the throng.

The competitive arena was no place for conservatism. There could be but one winner, and the loser was ordinarily denied all glory and respect.

Since the serfs were denied the "privilege" of jousting, in the classic sense, they would play at tilting, using extended arms, poles, or other lance-like implements. Though asceticism offered no encouragement, sons of noblemen and serfs alike did manage to find time and separate places to bowl, play football and quoits, and wrestle. In the winter, when tracts of moist land were covered with ice, they would fasten leg bones of animals to the bottom sides of their feet and, propelling themselves with metal poles, would skate toward each other in joust-like scenarios. It would appear that the role models for all children were the knights in combative dress participating in war-like sport.

With the rare exceptions of such games as bowling and quoits, the result of sport (either by design or by accident) was the infliction of injury (or even death). It is said that even bowling and quoits brought many muscle and skeletal injuries because of the materials with which the tools of these games were made. Medieval sport and the violence of the preceding era were surviving the challenges of time. The tests of endurance were being met.

The period of the Renaissance (generally associated with the era of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries) did offer some hope for the re-birth of the mind/body concept. It was believed that learning could be enhanced through good physical health. Offering substance

to this theory are statements within the writings of Comenius, da Feltra, Luther, Milton, Pietro, and Pope Pius II. Rousseau, in his book, Emile, spoke of ball games, hygiene, and gymnastic exercises. Health and physical education were fostered and nurtured. Authoritarianism and rigidity gave way to liberalism and individual freedom.

Yet, in spite of the recognition that health and fitness were important to develop, the practice of exercise was an individual matter, and the attractiveness of body building as a spectator sport was limited. The activities which were attracting increasing masses were dual and team contests.

One major reason for the swift emergence of such athletic associations as the American Football Conference, Eastern Collegiate Athletic Association, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, National Basketball Association, National Collegiate Athletic Association, and National Hockey League is because of the need to control athletic competition. Yet, the one area needing the most attention; that is, rules governing violence in competition, has been attended to the least. In recent years, there has been a noticeable attack on the evils of competition by such organizations as the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. The agencies governing competition are going to have to respond by developing approved monitoring systems.

Michener[2] has written that, ". . . the revulsion against overcompetitiveness has manifested itself in a vigorous debate over the tactics of Vince Lombardi." It seems that he (Lombardi) achieved immortality with his summation of the competitor's creed: "Winning

isn't everything, it's the only thing."

Vince Lombardi said some other things which, perhaps, reflects the attitudes of all too many with respect to the attractiveness of "violence in sport".

> "Football isn't a contact sport, it's a collision sport. Dancing is a contact sport.
>
> To play this game you must have fire in you, and there is nothing that stokes fire like hate.
>
> This (referring to football) is a violent sport. That's why crowds love it."

Crowds loved the blood in the gladiatorial arenas of Rome; crowds loved the violence associated with the jousting of the middle ages; crowds love the violence associated with contemporary baseball, ice hockey, and football.

Among the books in which passages directly, or by inference, depict the violence to be found in contemporary sports are:

> F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Captured Shadow;
> David Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction;
> A. E. Housman, To an Athlete Dying Young;
> James Michener, Sports in America; and
> Irwin Shaw, The Eighty-Yard Run.

Such films as:

> Bite the Bullet;
> Champion;
> Death Race 2000;
> Raging Bull;
> Requiem for a Heavyweight;
> Rocky I and II;
> Roller Ball; and
> Winning are additional examples of violence and its endorsement.

Does sadomasochism have to be an inevitable element in sport?

How would Norman Mailer answer this question? I suspect that it could be said that violence in sport, violence in art, and violence in society are reflections of one another.

Medieval sport cannot claim sole credit for the nature of sport as it is today. Neither can Rome, nor Nazi Germany (for that matter). A compilation of societal influences has made it possible for sport, through violence, to survive.

In closing I would like to symbolize a (not the) level of thinking regarding olympic-type sports as portrayed in the May, 1982 edition of Playboy magazine which, I expect, is a tongue-in-cheek perception of Bruce Feirstein's Real Men.

> "Real Men . . . feel that the Olympics (which, by the way were revived in 1896. Where? . . . Athens, Greece.) are . . . out of date. They question whether or not contests that test such antiquated skills as running, jumping, and throwing things have any place in the modern automated world.
>
> Consequently, they have started a movement to create the 'Ghetto Decathlon', in which junkies race against one another to:
>
> 1. Break into an apartment,
> 2. Terrorize the residents,
> 3. Steal their television set,
> 4. Run two miles,
> 5. Climb a chain-link fence,
> 6. Find a pawnshop,
> 7. Score the dope,
> 8. Break into a tenement,
> 9. Run up four flights of steps, and
> 10. Shoot up."

Does it surprise or bother you that allegedly humorous parallels between sport and the baser instincts of contemporary

society occur with relative frequency?

I do not have all the answers. I do not have all the questions. I do have, however, some major concerns about the future of athletics. Our predecessors, our brothers and sisters, and ourselves will all be accountable for the survival or extinction of sport. Its future is now and is dependent, in large part, upon a reinstitution of the Greek ideal.

Charles Kennedy[3] once said:

> "The ideals of sport are intangible. They exist in the hearts of men. They are like the city of 'Camelot', a city built to music, and therefore never built at all, and therefore built forever."

Let us all hope so.

Thank you.

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[1]Hamilton, Edith, "The Ancient Ways", The Sporting Spirit, Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1977. (P. 225)

[2]Michener, James A., Sports in America, Random House, New York, 1976. (P. 420)

[3]Kennedy, Charles W., Sport and Sportsmanship, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1931. (P. 36)